

Administrative Design Review Summary of January 29, 2009 Public Meeting

Background

Design Review has been a part of Seattle's land use and development approvals since 1994. The program has changed over time and currently includes two tiers: 1) a Design Review Board process for evaluation of large commercial / multi-family / mixed use projects by appointed neighborhood-based boards; and 2) an administrative (staff level) Design Review for projects below a design review threshold when a project proponent seeks departure from a code.

In 2008 Seattle Department of Planning and Development (DPD) began exploring expansion of Administrative Design Review to evaluate more types of development in response to input from the public and elected officials. City staff are exploring the establishment of administrative design review for residential projects fewer than 8 units (the current threshold for review in L3 zones). Currently, this development type is not reviewed. At the same time, DPD seeks to reevaluate the Administrative Design Review process in an effort to make efficient use of staff resources and reduce permit processing times associated with administrative design reviews.

From October through December 2008, feedback on the existing Administrative Design Review in Seattle was gathered from architects, developers, neighborhood representatives and DPD land use planning staff in small meetings, via one-on-one telephone interviews and in two large group working sessions. In all of these settings, attendees were offered the opportunity to suggest improvements to the existing system or entirely new ways of conducting review to achieve desired outcomes. This feedback was used to generate three general Options for expanding ADR to townhouses:

• Option 1: Apply Existing Administrative Design Review

Option 2: Streamlined ADR

• Option 3: Pre-Approved Plans

Public Meeting: January 29, 2009

These three schemes were described in diagrammatic form and presented for review and discussion at a public meeting held on January 29, 2009. Approximately 40 people attended: many of the DPD staff and community members contacted in the fall along with nearly a dozen people engaging for the first time. Feedback gathered at that meeting forms the core of this report. In addition to identifying

benefits and issues anticipated by the implementation of each scheme, minor refinements to the schemes themselves were offered.

A range of general comments and discussion followed an overall presentation of the ADR process and goals. These are summarized below. Comments and discussion specific to each of the three draft ADR Options are summarized on the following pages.

Presentations

- Ray Gastil, DPD Planning Director opened the meeting by welcoming attendees and providing project background and described the policy intent of the project.
- Geoff Wentlandt, DPD Planner gave an overview of the meeting agenda and purpose and goals for the meeting.
- Vince Lyons, Design Review Program Manager, summarized the history of Design Review, noting the drop in appeals after the onset of the Design Review program.
- Marcia Wagoner of Read-Wagoner, consultant to DPD, introduced the project team and gave a brief
 overview of the Status Report, to be found on the DPD's website. Marcia summarized stakeholder
 input collected by the project team during interviews, outreach and workshops to date. Marcia's
 summary included major concerns, desired outcomes, and ideas for improvement.
- Brandon Nicholson of NK Architects, consultant to DPD, presented an overview of the Townhouse building typology from various cities, and discussed shortcomings of some Townhouse products that have been produced in and around Seattle in recent years. Brandon described how expansion of ADR could address townhouse design.

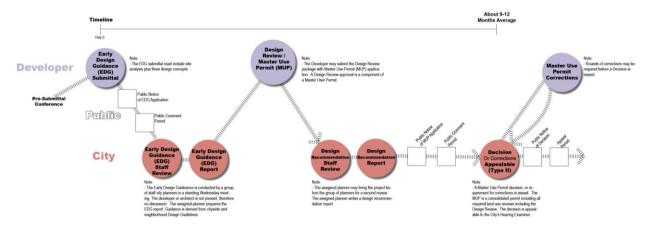
General Questions & Comments

- The ADR vs DR statistic is significant; 37 ADR (136 units) vs. 378 DR (14,000 units) from 8/05 to 9/08
- It's important to note, again, that ADR has been a voluntary process in the past.
- Unit Lot Subdivision notice, AFTER the project has been permitted, is such a fundamental flaw in the system. It's an obvious flaw that just needs to be fixed, and it should be an easy fix.
- Neighborhood Design Guidelines are under construction for most, if not all, neighborhoods. These requirements should be plugged into the process, somehow, even if just for a placeholder.
- The new multifamily code changes address a lot of the neighborhood concerns, already. What is the intent of this new process? Is this to make design mandatory? This won't change design. Developers hire architects to design for them, and they trust their architect to design a quality project. Committee by design is not necessarily a good thing.

- The market governs what projects look like, not Design Review.
- It seems like the issue for the townhouse projects being built is that they don't fit into the neighborhood. Code driven projects don't fit in either.
- The multifamily code DOES address a lot of neighborhood concerns.
- Does this proposal include ALL projects in LR zones below the thresholds, such as 2 unit apartment buildings? (A: It will first be applied to Townhouses only and could be extended in the future to other forms of development.) This will reduce the property values for all those projects. Why not reduce all property values across the board by including single-family houses in this, as well. If burden one, why not burden everyone?
- Single Family houses located in MF zones are the big issue.
- Property values will go down when a project permit time is extended, but design review significantly improves the quality of the project therefore improving the property values.
- Standard set of plans will most likely decrease the property value of a project site.

Option 1: Existing Administrative Design Review

Option 1 would require all townhouse projects to undergo the existing Administrative Design Review (ADR) process. The existing ADR process outlined below mirrors the format of the typical Design Review process, with staff planners conducting the review in lieu of the appointed neighborhood Design Review boards. A separate and distinct staff-level design review process specifically for Administrative Design Review has not yet been created in Seattle.



- Mirrors the Design Review Board process
- · Two public notice periods
- Allows development standard departures
- Appealable Decision (Type II)

Feedback & Analysis

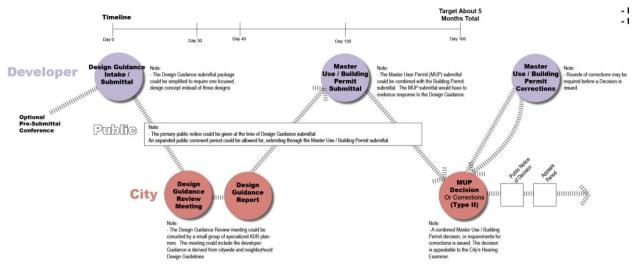
Analysis

No benefits or issues were widely discussed during the meeting for Option 1, the Existing Administrative Design Review process.

During the meeting there was a sense of consensus among stakeholders, designers, developers and staff that continuing to apply the existing process for Administrative Design Review to a volume of additional townhouse projects that would undergo required design review would place a large burden on both the DPD and the developer. (The status report projects an average of 50 additional townhouse projects per year entering design review per the proposal.) Compared to the other Options presented in the meeting, Option 1 received a relative lack of general interest and extensive comment.

Option 2: Streamlined Administrative Design Review

Option 2 is a streamlined version of the Design Review process. The streamlined process reduces the number of Design Review steps from two (Early Design Guidance + Design Recommendation) to one (Design Guidance), and applicants are given the opportunity to submit for a Building Permit at the same time as the Master Use Permit (MUP).



- Replace the existing ADR process
- One ongoing public notice period
- Allows development departures
- If departures, then decision is appealable (Type II)
- No departures, then not appealable (Type I)

Feedback & Analysis

A wide range of benefits and issues were discussed during the meeting for Option 2, Streamlined Administrative Design Review. Comments received on Options 2 included a range of generally supportive statements. Members of the audience made specific suggestions for elements that could improve or refine Option 2. Some members of the audience expressed opposition to any expansion of design review to Townhouses during discussion of Option 2. Discussion points are summarized below in several broad categories:

Positive - Option 2 Streamlined ADR

- If all projects below the current DR/ADR thresholds must be included in the ADR process, this is the best solution, as it's a more streamlined process.
- This will help to avoid situations in which the applicant/developer can divide the parent lot into smaller lots in order to stay under thresholds. (Also informally termed 'micropermitting')
- This option would presumably help to avoid creating incompatible right-of-way conditions due to the different requirements for the different processes.
- Even though mandatory ADR would add time (and therefore money) to the overall schedule,
 Design Review significantly improves the quality of the project which would therefore improve the property value.
- This option appears to be the easiest to implement immediately.
- The option is clear and easy to follow.

Negative - Option 2 Streamlined ADR

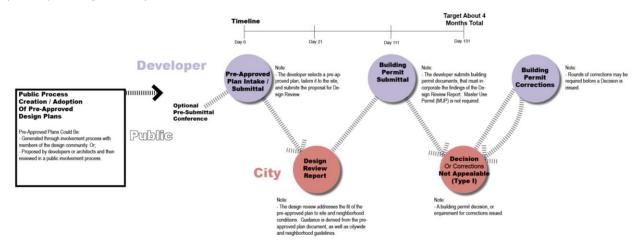
- It might be a good idea to create a defined comment period, so the public feels as though their comments will be heard and potentially incorporated into the design.
- It might be helpful to somehow incorporate community/neighborhood groups into the review process.
- Is there an opportunity for this process to be even more streamlined?

Analysis

Positive feedback and comments specifically on Option 2 outweighed negative comments. A number of specific suggestions were made - especially on the topic of public notice and community involvement. Since DPD is proposing that all projects now must go through some form of Design Review, there seemed to be consensus among the group that a more streamlined version of the ADR process could be betterfor all parties involved, including the City, the applicant, and the owner.

Option 3: Pre-Approved Plans

Option 3 focuses on the use of some form of pre-approved design plans. In this Option DPD would engage the public and then consider and pre-approve concept site plans for high quality townhouse designs. Designs could be scaled to fit several typical lot or block configurations in Seattle. The pre-approved plans would be created through a public process, which engages Seattle's design community, possibly through a competition or other collaboration.



- Voluntary use of pre-approved plans
- Public process to develop plans
- Departures not allowed (some flexibility per pre-approved plans)
- Decision not appealable (Type I)

Feedback & Analysis

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Positive

- Allowing neighborhoods to have input on pre-approved plans would be a great way to make communities feel included in the process.
- Pre-approved plans for each neighborhood might be a good way to make projects neighborhood specific.
- Replication is not necessarily bad, it's the replication of 'bad' architecture that's the
 problem. If we can come up with a good prototype, repetition might not be perceived as
 negative (ie: brownstones).
- The site plan approach deals with zoning issues in 2-dimension. It's then the architect's responsibility to address the exterior of the building and make it visually aesthetic. The site plan approach is not necessarily a cookie-cutter response.
- This option could work as long as it's site plan only. Details should be project and site specific.
- Scheme 3, the pre-approved plans scheme, seems arduous but worthwhile. It seems to be the greatest opportunity.

Negative

- Pre-approved plans seems like they would create the opposite affect than what's desired (uninteresting, cookie-cutter architecture).
- This option seems to negate the notion that neighborhoods want to be able to deal with specific neighborhood vernacular issues.
- Seattle does not have a quality 'architecture' style yet. Time is required to develop a quality townhouse culture. It's premature to impose the pre-approved plan approach on a system that doesn't have quality design/culture established yet. (terrible idea)
- We don't like or want cookie-cutter, but basically that's what the pre-approved plans approach is proposing.
- Standard set of plans will most likely decrease the property value of a project site.
- Projects need to be site specific. Every neighborhood and street has different, site specific, criteria to be considered.
- There should still be an opportunity for the public to comment. Replication is not necessarily a bad thing, it's the replication of 'bad' architecture that's the problem. If we can come up with a good prototype, repetition might not be perceived as negative (ie: brownstones).

- With regards to the pre-approved site plan scheme. The site plan approach deals with zoning issues, in 2-d. It's the architect's responsibility to address the exterior of the building and make it appealing. The site plan approach is not necessarily a cookie-cutter response.
- The Design Standards approach to the Pre-approved plans scheme is basically a design guidelines book/code for smaller projects. (ie: New Holly or High Point)

Analysis

The feedback indicates that there is some interest surrounding Option 3. There appears to be a great deal of curiosity with regards to the proposed alternatives for how to achieve Option 3 and some alternatives seem to be more appealing than others. There are three viable approaches to this option, including a design guideline book, pre-approved site plans (which may or may not include massing and elevations) or accumulation, over time, of previously approved plans. This option would require a significant amount of additional work beyond this proposal, and that should be factored in to the final decision.